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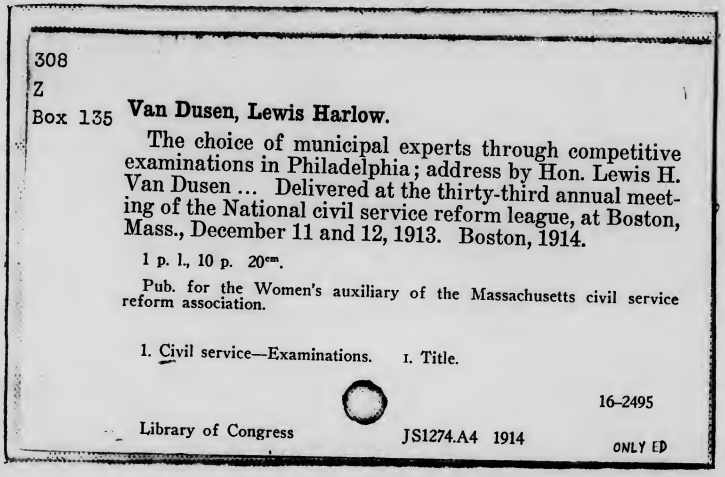

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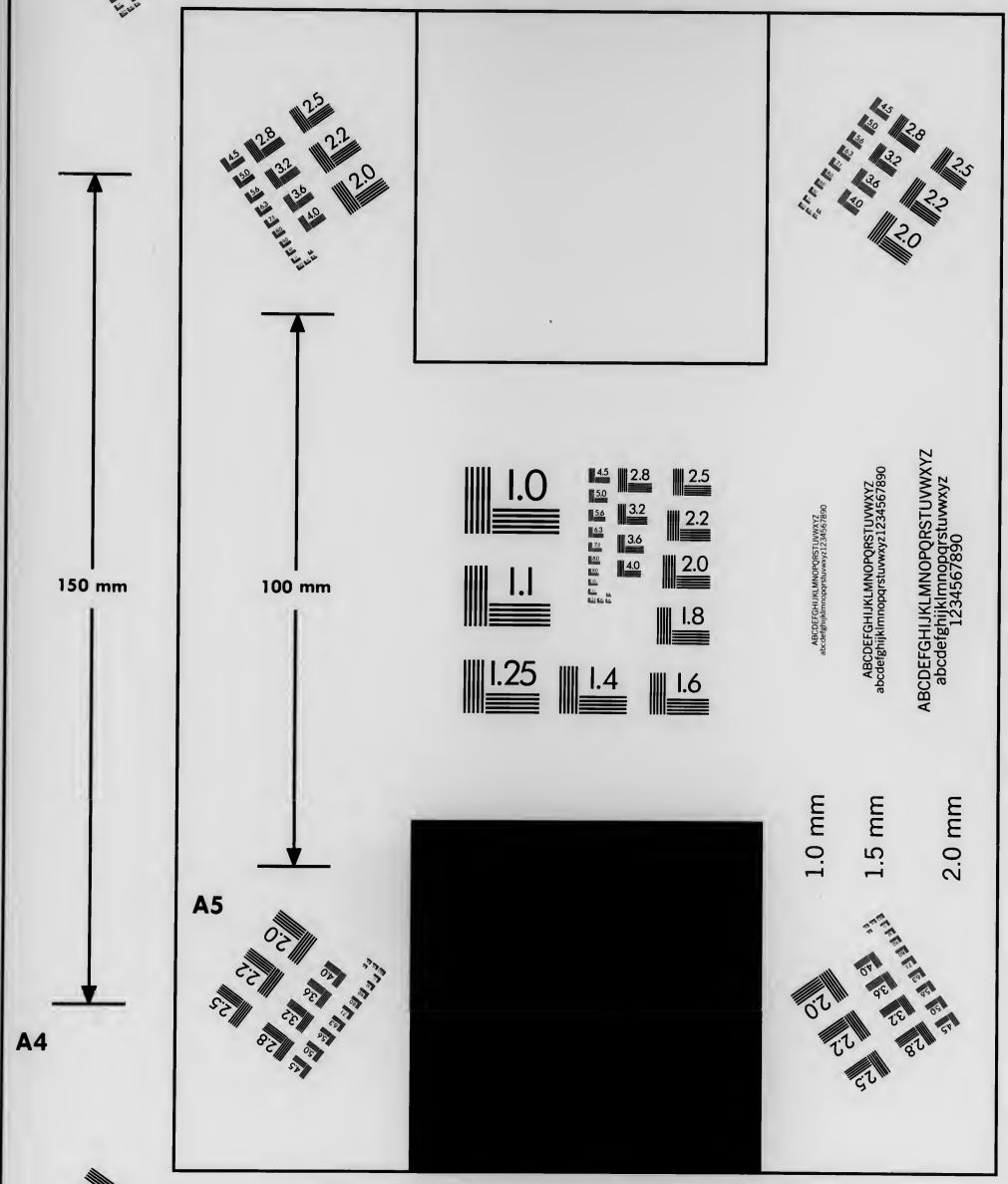

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The Choice of Municipal Experts Through Competitive Examinations in Philadelphia

Address by

Hon. Lewis H. Van Dusen

of the Philadelphia Civil Service Commission

Delivered at the Thirty-third Annual Meeting

of the

NATIONAL CIVIL SERVICE REFORM LEAGUE

At BOSTON, MASS.

December 11 and 12, 1913

PUBLISHED FOR THE
WOMEN'S AUXILIARY
OF THE
MASSACHUSETTS CIVIL SERVICE REFORM ASSOCIATION
31 BEACON STREET, BOSTON
1914

Oct. 7. 1923 RE

The Choice of Municipal Experts Through Competitive Examinations in Philadelphia

HON. LEWIS VAN DUSEN, OF THE PHILADELPHIA CIVIL SERVICE COMMISSION.

In every community where there exists a civil service commission there is much discussion, with and without merit, upon the proposition that the methods of the merit system are so inflexible that appointing officers are often hampered in securing competent employees on short notice, and that the system is particularly not adaptable to the filling of higher class positions, especially those requiring expert knowledge. Not infrequently appointing officers attempt to offset criticism of their departments by the assertion that they were either not able to secure competent employees through the merit system, or that they were at least delayed in so doing.

The purpose of this paper is to show by illustrations how the merit system is expeditiously equipping a new department involving 140 positions, all of which, with less than a dozen exceptions, are of a technical engineering character ranging from "tracer" at $600 per year to "chief engineer" at $6,000 per year, and all coming within the competitive class of the classified service, with the exception of three positions exempted from competition by act of Assembly. The paper will also include a few examples to show how other positions of a high order involving expert knowledge have been successfully filled by the merit system.

Near the close of the last session of the General Assembly of Pennsylvania an act was passed creating for the city of Philadelphia a department of city transit, which department was authorized to have charge, control and management of the transit facilities of the city. The act was approved May 9, 1913, to become effective July 1, 1913.

The necessities of the new department require that all of its 140 employees, with the exception of 8, be high-class engineers, draftsmen, rodmen, chainmen and tracers. Their titles and salaries were not known until the passage of the appropriation ordinance by city councils and its approval by the Mayor, on June 12, 1913. Therefore, although the new department was to begin work July 1st, it was not possible for the commission to take the first step toward filling the positions until after June 12th. Not less than two weeks public notice of examinations is required by law, and moreover a complete survey of the duties and requirements of each of these 140 positions had to be made before such advertisement could be issued.

The immediate problem confronting this new department was the construction of a great subway by the city with branching elevated lines involving the expenditure of vast sums of money. Public sentiment was very strongly in favor of immediate action looking toward this gigantic task, and it was therefore especially essential that the department of city transit be immediately manned with competent people. The nature of the work happened to be such that no prior eligible lists prepared by the commission, save for the filling of the half dozen clerical positions, could be held appropriate. Fourteen of the positions were filled by transfers, leaving a total of 118 technical positions to be filled by open competitive examination, of which all of the incumbents were to be engaged in a line of work never before undertaken by the city of Philadelphia, and of which very little had been done by private companies in that city.

The commission held a conference with the head of the new department and the requirements and duties for each of the positions were standardized and published with the announcement of the proposed examinations. On June 28, 1913, a special schedule was issued announcing competitive examinations for the following positions:

		Per Year.
1	chief engineer	$6,000
1	asst. engineer on designs	3,600
3	asst. engineers	$2,000–2,200
1	electrical engineer	1,800
4	asst. engineers (transitmen)	1,500
1	head draftsman	2,700
18	draftsman	1,000–1,200
19	draftsmen	1,200–1,500
24	draftsmen	1,500–1,800
1	checker	2,400
2	checkers	1,800
10	rodmen	960
10	chainmen	720
3	tracers	600

The examinations for the positions of lesser importance were prepared and rated entirely by the regular examiners of the commission, two of whom are competent civil engineers, and another a competent mechanical and electrical engineer. The other examinations were handled in a slightly different manner. Take for example the examination for "chief engineer" at $6,000 per year, a position of vast responsibility. Candidates were not assembled for this examination, but notice was issued that any person who cared to do so might file an application together with a detailed statement of his "training and experience," and a list of persons who could vouch for his character and ability. These statements were filed and a special board of examiners was appointed, consisting of the assistant chief engineer of the largest railroad system in the vicinity of Philadelphia, and a consulting engineer in private practice. This board of two members considered the statements of "training and experience" that had been filed and gave them a rating. Such candidates as received a mark of 70% or over were then summoned at a later date to meet the board singly in an entirely oral examination. This oral examination was simply a conversation upon engineering problems, but turned out to be exceedingly thorough and very

searching. A mark was then given the applicant after this interview, and, together with the mark received on the paper for "training and experience" constituted the final average of the applicant. Probably no more sensible or practical plan for securing a responsible $6,000 chief engineer could be devised by any employer. The result is that the department has for its "chief engineer" a man of long training who has behind him a record of real achievement in the city of Philadelphia in the line of engineering.

The examination for the position of "assistant engineer on designs," $3,600 per year, was conducted in a similar manner, with the exception that the applicants were assembled and given two days of practical designing to work out on paper. It might be interesting to note that in this examination there happened to be 4 competitors. Upon the completion of the examination none of the competitors measured up to the standards set by the board of examiners so all were declared ineligible and the examination was readvertised. In the second examination there were 12 competitors, or three times as many as before, and the same board of examiners will this time secure a list of competent eligibles. In a similar manner a special board of examiners was appointed to conduct the examination for "assistant engineer," $2,000-2,200 per year, and "head draftsman," $2,700 per year, and "checker," $2,400 per year, these examinations being of the ordinary assembled type with an oral interview added for the purpose of ascertaining the energy, judgment and personality of the applicant. Sometimes a nominal remuneration was paid these special examiners and sometimes the work was done gratis.

The rating of the papers in all the examinations held for the department of city transit was pushed forward by the commission with every possible means. Examinations began on July 21, 1913, and on August 1, 1913, the first eligible list was published. Other eligible lists followed in rapid succession until all were issued. The department made its appointments promptly. In a number of cases it was evident at the

time the examination took place there were not sufficient applicants to fill the positions if all should pass. Such was true of all grades of "draftsmen" for example. The commission did not even wait for the rating of the papers but immediately issued new announcements in every case where there was even a possibility of not having a sufficient number of competitors, so that the papers of the first examination had scarcely been rated when the second examination was held. A third examination was even held for certain positions in the same manner. The commission now has the satisfaction of reporting that at no time since the creation of that department has it been unable to fill all requisitions made by the appointing power. There has never been a word of complaint, either orally or written, from the director of that department, or his assistants, because of lack of eligibles at the time when needed, or because of any lack of qualifications of those certified. On the other hand the commission has received strong expressions of their approval of the character of examinations given, the quality of men certified, and the celerity with which the work was done. I here quote a letter from the chief engineer of the department of city transit to the chief examiner of the civil service commission:

Dear Sir:

Replying to your inquiry of the 1st instant, just received—it gives me pleasure to state that in the filling of technical positions in this department during the five months since it was created, the eligible lists of qualified men, furnished by you as resulting from competitive examinations, have provided us with a very efficient and satisfactory working force.

Of the seventy-nine appointments of engineers, surveyors, draftsmen, etc., already made in the engineering branch of this department, sixty-one were taken from the examinations held especially for us; eleven were transferred from the transit commissioner's organization for which they had previously qualified in competitive examinations;

and seven, including two stenographers and two clerks, were appointed from the eligible lists for any department.

My habit in selecting appointees from the list has been to supplement your classification by a personal interrogation of the applicants and by inquiry of their previous employers, because it seems probable that the men have personal qualities that may not be disclosed in the examination but which are important in considering any prospective employees. I also availed myself of the privilege, afforded through your courtesy, of looking over the candidates' examination papers on your files. As is shown by the record of appointments as posted on the published lists, the result of this care in selecting follows pretty closely the order of the candidates' standing on the lists, nearly all of the higher average men having been chosen, indicating the general correctness of your grading as to qualifications.

The questions given in the several examinations, as I found them while comparing papers, appear to me to be practical and pertinent to the duties of the positions, and well calculated to determine the technical fitness of the applicants.

Yours very truly,

HENRY H. QUIMBY,

Chief Engineer.

However, the complete adaptability of the competitive principle has been demonstrated by our commission, not only in emergencies arising out of the sudden creation of a new department such as I have thus far described, but under all usual circumstances, and particularly in filling positions of a highly technical or administrative character.

In Philadelphia we have the position of "city architect." The incumbent is charged with planning and supervising the erection of all buildings undertaken by the city itself. The salary of the architect is $4,000 per year. The position became vacant a short time ago and a

competitive examination was ordered by the civil service commission. From among some names submitted upon the commission's request by the Philadelphia chapter of the American institute of architects a board or jury of two members was selected by the commission to act in conjunction with its chief examiner. They planned the examination as follows:

Applicants were not assembled. Each architect submitted with his application a detailed statement of his "training and experience," together with plans, photographs and specifications of his best executed work, and a list of references. This material was passed upon by the board of examiners and all candidates found to be worth 70% were summoned to meet the examining board singly in an oral interview. This completed the examination.

It is manifest that it is necessary for the position of city architect to be filled by a man not only of great capacity but of excellent professional standing. It is also a fact that as a rule the better professional men are somewhat skeptical about entering competitive examinations. They are very jealous of their professional reputations. But we have to report that when the plan of this examination was announced 19 architects submitted their applications, their statements of "training and experience," and a bountiful supply of plans, specifications and photographs of their executed work. This material was gone over carefully by the examining board and 6 men were selected to enter the final competition which was the oral examination. Each one of the 6 was before the board of examiners for one-half hour or more, during which time many questions were put to him to test his judgment. The result was five eligibles, two of whom tied for first place. One of these, who was later appointed, is an architect of far more than local reputation, having built several important buildings for the Federal government, and is a member of one of a well known firm of architects in the city of Philadelphia. The other is an architect who drew the plans for the great terminal of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad at Chicago.

As a result of this examination the city has a most capable architect, and it has again been demonstrated that the merit system of examinations will rise to meet the occasion when properly administered.

Let me give you another illustration. The bureau of health was in need of a diagnostician and consultant. This is the physician who is called in by the bureau of health as an authority when a dispute arises between the family physician and the regular physicians of the bureau. His principal value, therefore, lies in his professional standing. Such men are not going to compete in the ordinary civil service examinations, and the head of the department of public health and charities therefore asked the civil service commission to exempt the position. We refused to do so because we believed in the adaptability of the merit system to almost any occasion. An open competitive examination was ordered. Notices were sent out asking simply for a detailed statement of the "training and experience" of the applicant, together with copies of any addresses, books or pamphlets or essays that he had written, also a list of professional references. Responses were received from 13 physicians. These papers were submitted to a board composed of two well known local physicians. After considering the statements of training and experience, the written articles and pamphlets submitted, and the references, this board placed three of them upon the eligible list. At the head of the list stood the professor of dermatology in the University of Pennsylvania, perhaps the best authority on contagious diseases in that community, and he was appointed. Thus again was demonstrated the fact that the competitive principle can be applied to filling the most difficult positions.

The limited time prevents me from describing many other types of examinations, but I shall at the conclusion of this paper provide you with photographs showing you how our commission examines dentists, bacteriologists, stenographers and skilled laborers of various types.

Our commission feels very sincerely that it has

demonstrated to the satisfaction of the fair-minded people in our city that the merit system in the civil service is adaptable to the greatest emergencies, and is conducive to the expeditious filling of positions with competent employees. In particular we assert that had it not been for the machinery of the civil service commission the pathway of the director of the new department of city transit would have been beset with grave difficulties in the matter of overcoming influences of divers kinds in securing competent and faithful employees.

The merit system has gone beyond the experimental stage in its application to higher positions involving either expert knowledge or administrative capacity. It is not a question as to whether expert or administrative officers should be chosen by other means than competitive examinations, but it is rather a matter of devising the intelligent adaptation of the method of examination to the position to be filled.

No method of examination is sacred be it ever so old. There is more in the method of the examination than in its substance, for the method determines largely the character of the man who will compete. This leads me to say that one of the reasons that has delayed the wide acceptance of the merit system as the best means of choosing experts and administrative officers is the lack of expert assistants on the staffs of the commissions. No corporation would undertake to build a bridge without the services of the best expert engineer obtainable, nor should any civil service commission undertake to apply the civil service system until it has first obtained the best expert civil service examiner obtainable. Indeed we require expert services in most of the walks of life, but few persons have recognized its need on the staff of a civil service commission. I am happy to say that our Commission has recognized this need from the out-set, and as a result of a most thorough and searching examination, conducted by Robert D. Jenks, Esq., Chairman of Council, National Civil Service Reform League, Mr. Elliot H. Goodwin, the League's former Secretary, and Mr. George R.

Wales, Chief Examiner of the United States Civil Service Commission, it obtained for its chief examiner a trained civil service expert, Mr. Arthur M. Swanson, whose experience and intelligent adaptation of the methods of examinations to the positions to be filled has brought to our commission a large measure of success.

In closing I trust you will pardon my referring again to the letter written by the chief engineer of the department of city transit to the chief examiner of our commission. This letter demonstrates, possibly better than anything I have said, the effectiveness of choosing municipal experts through competitive examinations provided the examinations are under the supervision of an expert civil service examiner.

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